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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: 17 November White House Data Meeting

1. At 1700 on Friday, 17 November, a meeting was convened in the White House Situation Room by Mr. Walt W. Rostow to review the Vietnam data problem and related actions currently in train, both in Saigon and Washington. The session was attended by Ambassador Robert Komer, Mr. William Jorden, Mr. Richard Moose, Mr. Philip Habib, Dr. Victor Heyman, Ambassador William Leonhart, Major General William DePuy, Mr. George Carver and Mr. George Allen.

2. The specific occasion for the meeting was consideration of a Washington reply to Saigon Embtel 10573, 7 November 1967. As Mr. Rostow explained, however, the more general objective was to get the US Mission in Saigon and the Washington community thinking together on the data problem and thus forestall a burgeoning exchange of lengthy cables attempting to argue differences of opinion better settled around a table. Mr. Carver pointed out that Ambassador Bunker had been advised at lunch on 17 November that such a meeting was going to be held and had expressed a great interest in attending. Since this was obviously impossible because of the conflict with a speaking engagement in New York, it was agreed that the results of the meeting would be shown to the Ambassador for his review prior to the dispatch of any further messages to Saigon.

3. Dr. Heyman went systematically through the argument of Saigon Embtel 10573 outlining the elements in the US Mission's position with which the Washington community had problems. These were, principally, the Mission's proposed treatment of recruitment, infiltration, and related net loss computations on VC strength.

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4. After some brisk but helpful discussion, two fundamental points were unanimously agreed to:

a) A sharp distinction must be and will be made between data series and computations used as management tools by the US Government and data publicly surfaced for general consumption to enlighten the world at large with regard to the status of the Vietnamese struggle.

b) Henceforth, public explanations of the state of the war and progress being reported therein will not be pegged on statistics, though statistics will be used where relevant as illustrative examples to support general qualitative judgments.

5. In line with the policy agreed to in (b) above, the thesis (that all accept) that the Viet Cong are having recruitment problems will henceforth be publicly argued on the basis of captured documents describing such problems and will utilize available evidence of the increasing number of North Vietnamese assigned to what were historically Viet Cong units. Our estimates of recruitment rates (probably 7,000 per month for 1966 and probably down to the order of 3,500 per month for 1967) may be cited, but as ancillary illustrations and not as the keystone of the argument. Infiltration rates and loss calculations will be similarly handled in a low key with appropriate caveats, so that we may let the facts speak for themselves without appearing to claim that our statistics are better than they are or prove points they do not necessarily demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt.

6. The Washington participants in the 17 November meeting reviewed all aspects of the data problem and work being done on it with Ambassador Komer. Ambassador Komer was given a copy of the 26 October 1967 preliminary report of the Washington interagency Data Task Force and brought up to date on the current activities of that Task Force's various components. He, in turn, outlined work going on in Saigon and new projects being initiated there. Of these, the most important was the development, under Ambassador Komer's aegis, of a reporting procedure designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Vietnamese Armed Forces, and to give reliable information on the strength, disposition and current duties of Regional and Popular Force units. Ambassador Komer agreed to furnish this information to Washington and also agreed to furnish the Washington community with copies of the provincial pacification plans for each of South Vietnam's provinces. We, in turn, agreed to provide Ambassador Komer with analytic back-up and support, particularly computer support, to assist him in analysis required in the field.

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7. The Hamlet Evaluation System was discussed in considerable detail. While acknowledging its weaknesses, Ambassador Komer praised it highly as the best thing ever developed and an indispensable management tool. There was unanimous agreement that HES was designed primarily as a management tool, not as a way of measuring population control, and that it should not be allowed to be corrupted for public relations reasons. Ambassador Komer emphasized that he had given personal instructions to every district advisor to report honestly through the HES mechanism, making it plain that he was interested in problems, not progress. Ambassador Komer gave his personal assurance that pressure for "results" would not be allowed to corrupt the HES system.

8. A number of other technical data questions were raised, discussed and resolved at this meeting. In general it was a most useful session which gave every appearance of achieving its principal object, i. e., getting Washington and Saigon on the same wave length. Ambassador Komer is now reviewing the Data Task Force report in detail. Dr. Heyman is charged with drafting a message to Saigon outlining our substantive agreements and making detailed recommendations in light thereof. This will be reviewed by the Data Committee and by Ambassador Bunker prior to transmission.


George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

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